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## **An artist as a figure between industry, technology, and imagination. Some remarks on *Portret artysty jako inżyniera. Twórczość Edwarda Ihnatowicza* by Joanna Walewska**

Joanna Walewska's account of the life and work of Edward Ihnatowicz can be described without much exaggeration as groundbreaking. To date, it is the first known comprehensive monograph of an artist who became familiar to the wider public as the author of *Senster*, a robotic and interactive installation imbued with animal-like form, displayed at the Philips's Evoluon in Eindhoven between 1970 and 1974. Yet, the book deserves praise, not only as the first of its kind, but also for two other reasons. Firstly, the author devoted a significant amount of energy and time to investigating archives that are often difficult to browse through, whether because of their limited availability (as is in the case of the Ihnatowicz family documents), or due to their immense size. When Walewska writes about the archives of James Gardner, the reader can have only a vague clue of their untapped richness, yet it is enough to admire immediately the attempts to render the historical moment as accurately as possible based on the exchange of the communication between the famous curator and the artist. Secondly, the reader becomes extensively acquainted with the vast cultural and historical background of Ihnatowicz's creative work. The book consists of five chapters that—as Walewska remarks in a bit of an unjustified self-deprecatory manner—are supposed to represent stylistic and methodologic heterogeneity, due to the variety of resources consulted.

The first chapter provides the necessary context of the period shortly after the Second World War, when the serious relationships between art, science, and technology were about to be forged, mostly in the field of the nascent computer art; or rather, in the somewhat ambiguous area of the various forms of artistic experimentation with computing that were later tentatively referred to as "computer arts". Tracing its beginnings, Walewska follows the narrative of the famous "Cybernetic Serendipity" (held at the ICA in London in 1968) as the decisive moment in the crystallization of the field, with the consecutive establishment of the Computer Arts Society (1969). She briefly mentions previous events, including "the first public

exhibition of computer art"<sup>1</sup> in April 1965, at New York's Howard Wise Gallery and another exhibition (the same year) at the Technische Hochschule in Stuttgart (organised by Frieder Nake and Georg Nees). She is aware of the debate surrounding the formation of the category, which has always been prone to semantic instability, partly since it was born as a project undertaken more by engineers-turned-artists and often derided as dehumanizing the arts as such. As Taylor reminds: "Computer art was an extension of the computer industry rather than a natural outgrowth of the arts".<sup>2</sup> Yet, the extensive discussions on the possible genealogies of computer art aside, Walewska drives it to the point where she emphasizes the fact that "Performativity and processuality (...) call attention to the shift from the artwork-as-object towards the artwork-as-process that happened in the field of art".<sup>3</sup> Such an observation provides well-justified ground for the interpretative framework she establishes in the following chapters, situating Ihnatowicz's creative output at the crossroads of kinetic art, computer art, contemporary sculpture, cybernetics, cognitive science, and artificial intelligence, each of which gets briefly explained in relation to Ihnatowicz's ideas and projects. The second chapter presents the artist himself; for the first time in the Polish literature on the subject, the life and work of Edward Ihnatowicz is given the attention it deserves. Walewska traces his whereabouts back to the days of his pre-war childhood on the eastern borderlines of the then-Poland. Later, she pictures the difficult path of his life throughout his youth and early adolescence, in times of big historical shifts. The Ihnatowicz family followed the journey shared by thousands of Polish citizens involved in military actions that spanned continents during the war. The family also encountered material hardships when they later settled in post-war Great Britain during times of economic deprivation. The narrative is continued in the fourth chapter, where the story of *Senster*—Ihnatowicz's most famous artwork—is presented in a very detailed yet concise way. The chapter follows the part presenting the beginnings of the cybernetic art of the day (with another detailed story of "Cybernetic Serendipity" as well as the social milieu of the early British electronic artists, curators, and critics). The next chapter brings an in-depth worthwhile discussion of the problematics of artificial intelligence, especially the shift which has been so thoroughly analysed by N. Katherine Hayles<sup>4</sup> (it is worth noting that she is absent from the bibliography). Granted, Hayles' book is not novel, but it still provides an interesting and valid perspective on how the concept of cybernetics has evolved through the consecutive instalments of the Macy Conferences. The way Walewska summarizes the debates on embodied cognition in the British context is of particular value regarding both the groundbreaking character of Ihnatowicz's project and the current discussion on artificial intelligence, which—especially in Poland—sometimes seems stuck in an

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<sup>1</sup> G.D. Taylor, *When the Machine Made Art. The Troubled History of Computer Art* (New York, London: Bloomsbury) (2014), p. 30 (Kindle version).

<sup>2</sup> G.D. Taylor, p. 30.

<sup>3</sup> G.D. Taylor, p. 29.

<sup>4</sup> N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman. Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press) (1999).

idea of cognition that is limited almost exclusively to the logics and the acts of operations on symbols.

However, glossing over a few doubts would do a significant disservice to the author of this important book that deserves the act of serious reading. First, one cannot escape the impression of the author's slightly too strong commitment to the tenets of history of art in its most conservative version. Surprising as it sounds considering the scope of the problematics employed as the interpretative framework (the history of computing technology, kinetic art, and cognitivism), Walewska seems to keep getting back to the safe grounds of the concepts provided by the classic training of art historians. Repeatedly expressed declarations of the innovatory and forward-thinking nature of Ihnatowicz's undertaking remain somewhat unproven due to the perspective that too often recalls the romantic paradigm of a (male) genius, an exceptional, unique human subject who with his special powers/abilities exceeds the limitations of his time. In this regard, the brief outline of media archaeology as the methodological choice of the author gets only partial justification. For example, posing the question whether Ihnatowicz was forced to lower his artistic expectations and scale down his vision might have produced more interesting results if reframed as an investigation of the nature of the cooperation between one of the leading technological companies of the time and an artist who was just about to gain more significant recognition. What was at stake in such a relationship? Was *Senster*, as had originally been planned by Ihnatowicz, indeed a predesigned vision come true, or was it rather the outcome of a series of negotiations between a company and a designer? The answer seems not so much the effect of meticulous work in the archive, as might be the outcome of a chosen theoretical perspective. This is especially true given the fact that Ihnatowicz was not the only artist cooperating with Philips Electronic: Nicolas Schoeffer's *CYSP1* was another joint project between the Dutch company and an early innovator who helped to bring about cybernetic art.

One might be also struck by the omissions in the bibliography: the fundamental "White Heat Cold Logic. British Computer Art 1960-1980" edited by P. Brown, Ch. Gere, N. Lambert and C. Mason gets briefly mentioned in the footnote and as the source of the article by Zivanovic. Interestingly, the article by Richard Ihnatowicz in the same volume is not mentioned at all. In some cases, Walewska cites the publications apparently available in their earlier forms (G.D. Taylor's doctoral dissertation has been already digitally published by Bloomsbury). It seems the author was very up-to-date with the current debates on the subject matter at the time of writing; however, for some reasons he did not sufficiently verify the sources at the time of editing. Unfortunately, the editing on the part of the publishing house is the weakest aspect of the book, considering the number of minor and major mistakes, for which apparently Iwona Wakarecy as an editor and the proofreading of Wydawnictwo Naukowe UMK is responsible. In addition, the chapter on media archaeology gives an outline of the field which otherwise is much more complex and prone to internal debates. Walewska somehow glosses over such discussions, presenting a rather too unified and compact view of this heterogeneous field (she

also manages not to mention Siegfried Zielinski at all, which itself is far from a gesture of innocence). However, her account succeeds in perfectly embodying one of the basic tenets of what has been presented as her methodology of choice. The editors of one of the newest takes on media archaeology state: "Rather than positing an "orthodoxy", the book presents itself as an open forum for very different voices, hoping to trigger "polylogues" about the problems and prospects of this emerging field".<sup>5</sup> Joanna Walewska's proposition unquestionably instigates such polylogy: its subject is not limited to Edward Ihnatowicz's legacy, but also skilfully incorporates the matter of the very beginnings of technological art. The audience interested in how the field at the crossroads of science, art, and technology came into existence gets a highly inspirational book, unfolding the lesser-known aspects of the process and documenting the creative work of this prominent figure, who for years seemed (unfairly) slightly forgotten. Regardless of any doubts, it is definitely something to be thankful for.

**Joanna Walewska, *Portret artysty jako inżyniera. Twórczość Edwarda Ihnatowicza*, (Toruń: Nicolaus Copernicus University Press) (2015), p.242.**

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<sup>5</sup> *Media Archaeology. Approaches, Applications, and Implications*, eds. E. Huhtamo, J. Parikka (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press) (2011), p. 2 (Kindle version).